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From the Field: The Failure of a Success Story: Reforming Georgia's Public Service Broadcaster

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Abstract: Georgia's "Law on Broadcasting" was passed in 2004 to provide, among other things, a legal framework for the transformation of the country's state broadcaster into the public service media provider. The law itself has been praised internationally for its progressive nature and presented as an example for other post-Soviet countries to follow. A decade later, and after a number of amendments, it is no longer seen as effective in ensuring that public service broadcasting in Georgia provides the expected quality and range of services, or can be immune to political interference. Since its birth, GPB has suffered from continuous crises and scandals, and has never been a major player in the Georgian media. There have been several attempts involving international organisations and institutions to reform and improve GPB, to elevate its status and increase its market share, but none of them have succeeded. Most of those efforts have been supported by the European Commission and the OSCE, with participation from such media organisations as the BBC, which had run a series of training and monitoring programmes until 2011. A comprehensive programme of editorial, managerial and structural reform at the Georgian broadcaster developed in 2011-12 was shelved ahead of parliamentary and presidential elections, and GPB has been in a state of semi-paralysis ever since. The article examines the state of public service broadcasting in Georgia and what could be done to improve it.

Keywords: Georgia, public, service, broadcasting, media, reform, GPB, PIK, TV, radio

Introduction

The establishment of public service broadcasting in transitional and developing countries continues to be seen as an important aspect of international efforts to bring democracy to their citizens and to engender civil society¹. One of the latest institutional reiterations of its vital role for freedom of expression came from the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, in November

¹ One of many instruments of supporting policies is Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)3 of the Council of Europe on the remit of public service media in the information society. The OSCE's Office on the Freedom of the Media is widely considered a watchdog of public service media in Europe and the FSU, while the European Broadcasting Union promotes public service media values and facilitates state broadcasters transformation and integration with the PSB community.

2014. She stressed the special position of public service broadcasters in media space, by saying: “The unique feature of public service broadcasters is that they are controlled by the public, funded by the public and made for the public” (OSCE 2014). But in the age of social media and citizen journalism, and in the context of digitised media convergence, this role is being increasingly questioned. Also, the performance record of many public service broadcasters set up after the end of the Cold War in the former Communist and post-Soviet countries has been often seen as either disappointing, or has fallen short of expectations.

Following the transformation of state broadcasters into public service ones in a number of the former Warsaw Pact countries in the 1990s, the PSB “offensive” moved on to the former Soviet Union republics, spearheaded by the OSCE, and supported by European and international institutions. But it met with either significant resistance or reluctance in target countries, which has resulted in quite limited outcomes. While several governments embraced the concept to fulfil conditions of membership of international organisations, its implementation has had much to be desired.

For instance in Azerbaijan, the country’s public service broadcaster functions side by side with the state one, and unsurprisingly, has a slim audience and a more modest position on the market than the rivals. Its independence is widely seen as symbolic. One of the key conditions for Azerbaijan’s membership of the Council of Europe had been the establishment of public service broadcasting, which was duly set up in 2005 with some international support. But soon afterwards Azerbaijan’s Public Television and Radio Company, ITV, was found lacking in many of the usual attributes associated with an independent, robust media organisation with a public service remit. In 2008, the OSCE provided funds to launch a capacity building programme after an assessment by BBC experts identified a number of areas in need of an editorial and institutional boost².

One of the most recent entrants to join the PSB club, Kyrgyzstan, is still struggling to understand the concepts and values behind the idea. It remains the only Central Asian state to introduce PSB, following renewed international pressure after the violent ousting of President Bakiyev in 2010. But Kyrgyzstan’s transformation from state to public broadcasting has been fraught with difficulties despite significant funds provided by the US government³. In 2012, The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office provided some funding to promote the culture of public service broadcasting in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and BBC World Service Trust managed to conduct several seminars and roundtables in the former, but failed to make any inroads in the latter.

² The assistance training and development project was funded by the Baku office of the OSCE and delivered by BBC World Service Trust between 2008 and 2010. For details see OSCE 2010.

³ In 2012, Internews started implementing a USAID programme worth several million US dollars aimed at reforming the former state broadcaster, but there is very little public record of what it has achieved.

The recent passing of a new law on public service broadcasting in Ukraine has been a relatively muted affair eclipsed by the conflict in the east of the country. But it may also partly be because it had taken 10 years to struggle through parliament – a result of strong political resistance in a country with the media controlled almost exclusively by powerbrokers and oligarchs. Within that period, the OSCE and the Council of Europe had consistently funded media law experts and consultants in periodic projects to push it through the legislative stage. Several European Union governments – notably Denmark and Norway – have been funding projects aimed at media reforms, which included supporting PSB initiatives⁴. Ironically, Ukraine's public service broadcasting was set up in 2013 as an online citizen initiative of a small group of disgruntled journalists practically without international funding and before the passing of the law on PSB. Western funds came about only later following the exacerbation of the conflict with Russia.

Both Armenia and Moldova passed legislation on PSB in the last decade, but have barely moved beyond the legislative stage or institutional change. In Armenia, public radio and television have been set up as two separate entities, and the country is only now considering merging them – at least for news and current affairs output – into one entity. In Moldova, the public broadcaster is still under strong government control.

Against this background, Georgia has been consistently presented as a success story and an example to follow in the region. After the Rose Revolution in 2004, the country's parliament passed a new broadcasting law hailed as one of the best legal frameworks around, which laid a foundation for establishing the Georgian Public Broadcaster (Georgian Law on Broadcasting 2004). The legal framework was developed with funding and expertise from several Western sources and followed the best practice and established international standards. But a decade on, there are few reasons to celebrate GPB's forthcoming anniversary. Under the former president, Mikheil Saakashvili, the public broadcaster was repeatedly accused of working to his administration's agendas even though its news division was widely considered as more reliable and balanced than the commercial or opposition outlets (UNDP 2010: 11). Its audience share was low and its impact limited compared to commercial rivals. Following the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2012 and 2013 respectively – and the subsequent departure of Saakashvili and many of his supporters, GPB has again been subjected to political and economic pressures by the new administration. Rounds of dismissals at the top of the organisation's management have been followed by litigation and reinstatements, and compounded by a protracted crisis within its governance structure⁵.

⁴ One of the latest such programmes is a four-year DANIDA-funded programme of media democratisation in seven EU Neighbourhood countries, including Ukraine and Turkey, implemented by NIRAS.

⁵ For an overview of the problems at the top of the GPB management and in the governance structure, see Transparency International's report 2013.

So, is there still a strong case for claiming that public service media are so central to protecting and promoting democracy and civic values? Has the advent of social media and citizen journalism combined with digitised media convergence changed the media landscape to the extent that the mission almost exclusively assigned to PSB is now being shared by others, or perhaps is being gradually taken over?

Georgia: an Exception or the Rule?

The Georgian example is a case study showing that the role of public service broadcasting should not be underestimated in the battle for democracy, freedom of expression, and – by extension – ought to be seen as indispensable for vibrant and participatory civil society also in the digital age. The majority of funding for media development in Georgia has come from the United States agencies, which gradually shifted their priorities from supporting mainstream media to new and alternative media, culminating in a multimillion dollar USAID-funded project, G-Media, launched in 2010⁶. Any support in the transformation of the Georgian state broadcaster into a public service one, and in its subsequent reform and development has been largely left to European institutions such as the European Union and the OSCE. The process has never attracted major external funding, or consistent assistance, with only several limited training and monitoring projects implemented in the last few years (for details, see the section on outside assistance to GPB below).

The fact that the Americans have effectively stayed away from the public service media sphere in Georgia resulted in what appears to have been a tacit division of labour between them and the European institutions. With its focus on the Internet and alternative media, and barely a year after its launch, the G-Media project was reportedly finding it increasingly difficult to identify new potential beneficiaries, while the ailing GPB was starved of funds to conduct a comprehensive reform programme. Media market research at the time, however, demonstrated that television in Georgia remained the main, and for the majority of people, the only source of news and important information. According to surveys conducted by Caucasus Research and Resource Centres (CRRC) in 2011, almost 90% of the Georgian population relied on television – and television mainly – as a source of information. It is true that the Internet use for this purpose has recently doubled in urban centres, but it is estimated that it will take many years in Georgia for Internet news provision to compete with television. In rural areas, TV is often the only source, with many people across the social spectrum admitting in surveys that they no longer own a radio receiver at home. In 2010, only about one in every twenty-five households in Georgia was reported as having a radio set⁷ (Open Society Foundation 2012: 16). The Saakashvili years left a legacy of largely independent, but under-funded newspapers and magazines with relatively low

⁶ For an overview of the programme, see the IREX website <http://www.irex.org/project/georgian-media-enhance-democracy-informed-citizenry-and-accountability-g-media>.

⁷ This does not include car radios for which there are no reliable statistics.

circulations, and a politically contested broadcasting landscape with major TV stations either controlled or owned by the former president's supporters until 2013 (Transparency International 2009). Although in 2009 president Saakashvili boasted in a CNN interview about the pluralistic nature of Georgia's television scene, the truth remained that out of nearly thirty nominally independent channels two dominated the scene – and both were widely considered to be the mouthpiece of the government. Both *Rustavi 2* and *Imedi* are privately owned and licensed as private broadcasters, but under Saakashvili they were believed to be controlled and financed by his close political allies.

Before parliamentary elections of 2012 which dislodged Saakashvili's government, *Rustavi 2* commanded about a third of all television audiences in Georgia, while *Imedi* came second with more than 20% of viewers. The first channel of the Georgian public broadcaster came third with anything between 4 and 8% of the overall audience⁸. The most prominent opposition channels, such as *Maestro* or *Kavkasia*, managed to attract even smaller audiences as a result of what was believed to be politically motivated market manipulation. It came through the tight control of television advertising, which was also managed by people associated with Saakashvili. As a result, advertising income of opposition channels was low, and they had to rely on political funding rather than market mechanisms. By contrast, *Imedi* and *Rustavi 2* achieved relatively healthy income from advertising, which was being induced by political market distortion.

Georgia's public service broadcaster had never fitted well in that picture. There was little interest on the part of the administration to make it better or stronger because this would entail drawing viewers away from *Imedi* and *Rustavi 2*, and possibly reducing advertising income. Even though for most of the time under Saakashvili the Board of Governors of GPB was made up of people allied to the government, it still meant extra editorial scrutiny and potential public insight into any interventions or manipulation of output. It is no wonder therefore that keeping GPB as a marginal and largely unreformed outlet was actually in the interest of the presidential apparatus despite any public pronouncements to the contrary.

In 2011, the European Union launched an initiative to fund a comprehensive programme of reforms and modernisation at GPB, building on previous training and development work with the Georgian broadcaster. That project never took place. Three years on, and several crises later, GPB remains in a state of deadlock (Civil Georgia 2014). It is a regrettable state of affairs, as television is the dominant medium in Georgia, while the Internet penetration remains relatively low outside Tbilisi and major cities. The new and alternative media are predominantly produced by educated urbanites, and consumed mostly by a younger minority. Civil society in Georgia still craves for objective, balanced and reliable news and current affairs provision, good educational programmes and quality entertainment on television. Complaints that commercial channels focus on low budget

⁸ The actual figures have always been contested in the context of not fully reliable measurement and monitoring in what is now seen as a heavily manipulated market.

entertainment programmes and are politically biased and manipulative are common⁹.

The present paper examines reasons for the continuing poor condition of public service broadcasting in Georgia in its otherwise relatively pluralistic and vibrant media market. It analyses the research leading to the project proposal to reform GPB in 2012 which the European Union Delegation in Tbilisi was not able to launch and implement at the time in the tense pre-election political environment. Despite the passing of time and the change of government, the findings of that research remain for most part fully valid today. It is argued that in the context of recent political developments in Georgia following parliamentary and presidential elections there, GPB requires concerted intervention as a matter of urgency.

The Premise

The present deplorable condition of GPB can be seen as an illustration of the limited value of the approaches adopted by international organisations and agencies in transforming former Soviet Union countries' state broadcasters into public service organisations. A lot of resources and efforts had been assigned to elaborating the necessary legal frameworks, and to making sure that respective new media laws passed through parliaments and became integrated into modernised regulatory and licensing systems. Similar attention was given to designing and developing governance systems and bodies, and ways and procedures of appointing them.

But the belief that such legal and structural underpinning would be the best way of protecting the independence of newly formed public service broadcasters from political interference and ensuring freedom from other external pressures turned out to be largely misguided. The Georgian media law is considered to be among the most progressive in the region, and the Georgian Law on Broadcasting has been used as an example to follow in legislative initiatives to reform the media in such countries as Turkmenistan or Kyrgyzstan. The intricate and detailed system of selecting, approving and rotating members of the Board of Governors of GPB incorporated in the law has been subject to several amendments, including the latest reduction in their number. They were all voted through in Parliament and examined in judicial reviews, as well as debated within civil society¹⁰. But this has not prevented the government from manipulating and interfering with GPB – both during the Saakashvili presidency, and under the current administration.

The extent of interference can be illustrated by the replacement of Giorgi Chanturia after the defeat of Saakashvili's government in 2012 with Giorgi

⁹ See, for example, the controversy and a debate that followed it caused by an episode of an entertainment programme "Apartment 18" on GDS TV channel available on <http://www.georgianews.ge/society/27806-the-bum-scandal.html>. The offending footage can be viewed on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1X-5DDZUFY>.

¹⁰ The latest amendment was analysed in detail by Katrin Nyman Metcalf for the OSCE in March 2013.

Baratashvili as GPB's Director-General. Freshly appointed Baratashvili was dismissed by the Board of Governors in early 2013, reinstated later in the year as a result of legal action, only to be dismissed again by the Board later that year. In a parallel process, the law on the Board of Governors was amended again in 2013, reducing the number of members to nine from fifteen, but failing to ensure an orderly transition to the new structure. The amendment was introduced at the time of a Board membership crisis after several resignations, resulting first in a deadlocked body lacking a quorum, and then in creating two parallel structures in an attempt to bypass legal and constitutional problems arising from the changes¹¹. This emphasis on the legal – or even perhaps legalistic – aspect of introducing public service broadcasting in post-Soviet countries has been to the detriment of the editorial, managerial and journalistic side of the transformation. The change has been largely controlled by consultants and experts with a law background, and quite understandably focused on legal and procedural matters. In the case of Georgia, this approach resulted in an intrinsic weakness of GPB as an editorial outlet, as a broadcaster to be accountable to its audience, and as a media organisation to be capable of competing in an open market.

This weakness has been the main reason for the partial self-disablement of the organisation. It has preferred to spend external funding on technology, studio infrastructure and improvements of formats, but to steer away from substantive work in editorial and content areas, which requires a lot of long-term effort and is not easily measurable. The lack of journalistic and editorial professionalism, low skills base and inept managerial practices have rendered it vulnerable to political interference which the legal framework alone could not address. The continued deficiencies within GPB became subject of closer international attention in 2008, when opposition protests started to take place in front of the GPB main building, following the re-election of Mikhail Saakashvili. The demonstrators' demands for balanced and objective news at the time of elections made the international community aware of how important the former state broadcaster was for the Georgian public life.

Subsequently, several major international media organisations were called upon to examine the internal situation at GPB towards the end of 2008, resulting in needs assessment reports focusing on editorial and managerial aspects of its operation. They were followed by a series of assistance interventions of limited scope and duration, which appear to have had negligible impact on the organisation.

Outside assistance to GPB

International organisations and agencies have been quite actively involved in the development of the media in Georgia in the last decade, but relatively modest funds have been dedicated to the country's public broadcaster. It is possible that after addressing the legal sphere related to broadcasting, an assumption was made

¹¹ For an explanation of the convoluted process, see Transparency International's 2014 report, p. 7.

that the bulk of the job had already been done. The Law on Broadcasting did not only provide the necessary regulatory framework for the functioning of GPB, but also guaranteed it a stable source of funding from the state budget unavailable to commercial outlets and media start-ups queuing for international donor money.

The new broadcast law for Georgia was hailed as a huge success, but the intended big bang associated with transforming the state broadcaster into a public service one in 2005 never really happened. The re-branded company failed to capture the public's viewing. Audience figures fell to the point of being negligible, until the war with Russia in August 2008, which briefly reversed the trend.¹² At the invitation of the European Union, consultants from the BBC conducted a Needs Assessment mission in October 2008 in which they sounded a warning:

“We do not want BBC trainers to come and remedy shortcomings at GPB only for us to find that the problem preventing the station from gaining public trust lies elsewhere, such as in a latent mechanism that allows outside forces to exert control. We explained that we have a duty to protect the BBC's reputation. The BBC does not want to be accused of propping up an organisation that purports to uphold public broadcasting values but is in fact state broadcasting in disguise” (BBC World Service Trust 2008: 10).

The subsequent series of training activities funded by the European Union and focusing on the editorial integrity and standards in news and current affairs at GPB was delivered by BBC World Service Trust experts until March 2010. The Head of News at GPB at the time, Khatuna Berdzenishvili, said that the training had had considerable impact on the news and current affairs output, and brought about an increase in audience figures.

This was followed by another intervention involving UNDP and the BBC, again partly funded by the EU. The “Development of Media Monitoring capacities in Georgia” programme was aimed at building the capacity of GPB for professional media coverage. Its delivery started in April 2010 and came to an end in 2012.

Between December 2009 and February 2010, experts from *Canal France International* visited Tbilisi twice to assess the institutional capacity of each of the three TV channels with emphasis on the 2nd channel and with the view to restructuring it into a parliamentary channel. Those two short-term missions resulted in more assessment reports but no concrete results.

A number of international agencies have sponsored or provided funds for specific programmes or activities at GPB. The British Embassy funded training for GPB staff in the run-up to a launch of a political talk-show “Public Politics”. The Swiss Agency for development and Co-operation (SDC) funded a TV programme for farmers, and the Eurasia Partnership Foundation provided a grant to create and run a joint TV and radio project “European Time” on EU integration issues. Konrad Adenauer Foundation contributed financially to the production of the show.

¹² According to figures supplied by AGB Nielsen Media Research in Georgia.

In 2011, GPB itself commissioned the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) to conduct a mission examining the structural and institutional health of GPB with the view to producing a strategy paper for the organisation for the following five years. It also included looking into such issues as the impact of digitisation on GPB, and the implications of the planned relocation to new premises. The project was funded by UNDP and the Swedish International Agency for Development (SIDA). The strategy document has been posted on the GPB website since 2012 (GPB 2012). Apart from a short news item¹³ announcing further development and improvement of GPB in line with the EBU strategy nothing happened until late 2014, when the EBU announced a repeat of the exercise from 2011-12. It is to be led by the same consultant to revise and update the strategy paper, which had never been acted upon in the first place¹⁴.

There has been no comprehensive, longer-term assistance programme to the Georgian public broadcaster to date that would address problems contributing to the state it is in at present. Before the international community commissions yet prepares another strategy paper or needs assessment mission, it is worth re-examining the findings and recommendations of the research conducted in late 2011 for the European Union Delegation in Tbilisi. With several exceptions, mainly to do with the closure of the Russian language external satellite channel, PIK in 2012, they still reflect quite accurately the state of affairs at GPB, and the steps that could be taken in order to empower the broadcaster to perform its role as envisaged in the legal founding document of 2004.

The Needs Assessment Report of 2011

The full version of the report completed in October 2011 and submitted to the EU Delegation in Tbilisi has not been published.¹⁵ Instead, a shorter version of the document, entitled ‘The Briefing Note’ was disseminated to international organisations, local NGOs and Georgian government departments and presented at roundtable meetings in the Georgian capital.¹⁶ The local media reported that the top management had agreed with most of the findings (Mchedlidze 2011). At that time, the planned reform of GPB was on the list of priorities of the Georgian government. Shortly after the dissemination of the findings and recommendations included in the Briefing Note, GPB modernisation disappeared from the governmental priority list. It automatically meant that the EU Commission Delegation in Tbilisi was not be able to dedicate over a million Euros previously

¹³ See TV post on <http://www.gpb.ge/NewsView.aspx?Location=156&LangID=2>.

¹⁴ The measure announced in November 2014 at the 11th South Caucasus Media Conference in Tbilisi.

¹⁵ The full text of the report is available online
https://www.academia.edu/10173652/Georgian_Public_Service_Broadcaster_Needs_Assessment_Report_2011

¹⁶ The document is available online
https://www.academia.edu/10173782/Georgian_Public_Broadcaster_Assessment_Report_Briefing_Note

earmarked for the reform programme and explicitly requested by the administration simply because Saakashvili's government no longer saw it as a priority. One can only speculate why government policy changed so dramatically and at such short notice in an obvious turnaround. One possible explanation is that the government of the day needed to energise GPB with extra funding for a relatively short period before the parliamentary elections in the context of growing uncertainty about the outcome.¹⁷ The needs assessment report with its proposed reforms would have meant additional constraints rather than a boost to the government's electoral campaign.

The sections below present briefly the contents of the document with necessary amendments to take in the events and changes that have taken place at GPB and on the Georgian political stage since then.

Public Service Broadcaster (GPB) – basic facts and figures

Georgian Public Broadcasting (GPB) at present consists of two television channels and two radio stations, but is popularly identified with TV Channel 1. The generalist 1st Channel has traditionally lagged well behind its commercial rivals, *Rustavi 2* and *Imedi* in terms of audience share, but has consistently scored as the third player in viewing ratings (Open Society Foundation 2012: 24). The 2nd GPB channel, increasingly referred to as the parliamentary channel, is still not fully developed and operational, and there are no firm decisions about its future shape or direction apart from periodic promises to transform it into a sustainable operation. GPB used to hold an external service Russian-language satellite TV channel under its umbrella until its closure in late 2012, which is discussed in a separate section below. The channel, known as PIK (based on its Russian-language acronym¹⁸) re-launched in 2010 in a presidential initiative to counterbalance the Russian media influence in the region in the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008.

There are two GPB FM radio stations, with FM102.4 mirroring the generalist nature of TV 1st Channel, and the FM100.9 playing mostly music, and sometimes inserting some speech-based content. There are no available statistics on audience figures of any Georgian radio stations, including the public ones (Open Society Foundation 2012: 24). The on-line presence of GPB as an Internet media content provider is in its infancy, and does not feature highly in programme priorities.

The output of both GPB radio and television channels is the usual mix of news, culture, history, education and entertainment found at many former Soviet state broadcasters transiting into open market environment. With its low budget compared to commercial rivals and the constraints imposed by its public service

¹⁷ The uncertainty in the Saakashvili camp was vastly exacerbated by the sudden and meteoric rise of Bidzina Ivanishvili on Georgia's political scene in 2011.

¹⁸ The full name in Russian was «Первый Информационный Кавказский».

remit, GPB cannot compete in the area of entertainment or TV drama programming.

In one of the legal amendments several years ago, GPB was additionally burdened with the obligation to cover – and pay for – major international sporting events and tournaments, including the costly World Cup. Commercial TV stations had previously experimented with broadcasting sport events, but repeatedly found it hard to attract enough associated advertising even to cover the cost, let alone make any money. But the Georgian audiences quite vocally demanded major sporting events on television, and GPB ended up with this loss-making remit further depleting its ability to commission or purchase any quality programmes.

Consequently, a considerable part of the public broadcaster's budget is spent on news and current affairs as part of its public service remit with little left for anything else. Despite several political talk shows, which periodically achieved good viewing ratings, many Georgians have repeatedly described the majority of programmes as boring or simply “unwatchable”.

The image of GPB in the eyes of ordinary Georgians has repeatedly suffered from a series of events shortly after it was set up. The period of the state of emergency introduced by President Mikhail Saakashvili in November 2007, and his subsequent re-election as President in January 2008 reinforced negative perceptions. At that time, GPB was accused of failing to report important events related to the opposition parties. This was followed by a complete clean-out and replacement of the Board of Trustees and top management, and a re-launch of the 1st channel. The political tension around GPB continued well into 2010, leading to legislative changes, deals with the opposition, an enlargement of the Board of Trustees by a few opposition personalities, and yet another change at the top. The cycle was repeated after the 2012 and 2013 elections, which witnessed another leadership crisis and more legal manoeuvring around the Board of Governors this time resulting in the reduction of the body's membership.

The Georgian public service broadcaster is funded from the state coffers by an annual allocation of 0.12% of the overall budget with a ring fencing proviso that any possible decreases in subsequent year budgets would not trigger a proportional decrease in the allocations compared to a previous year (Georgian Law on Broadcasting, Article 33, p. 21). The organisation is permitted by law to generate commercial income, although there are quite many limitations and conditions attached to such areas as advertising or sponsorship.

As of 2011, GPB employed about 930 people at its two TV channels and the two radio stations. There is high fluctuation of the workforce, and salary levels are considered low. Only about 5% of staff is on continuing or permanent contracts – mostly people in senior positions – while the rest are employed on short-term contracts.

Legal and regulatory environment

Broadcasting Law of 2004

The functioning of GPB as a public service broadcaster is regulated by the Georgian Law on Broadcasting. It was adopted by the country's Parliament in 2004, with numerous subsequent amendments. Chapter III of the Law obliges GPB to fulfil its duties in the spirit of the legislation passed in many of the European Union states on public broadcasting. Among other things, it requires GPB:

- To be editorially independent, fair and impartial
- To be free from political, religious and commercial influence
- To maintain programming balance in its scheduling to cover all types of content, including news and current affairs, politics, social issues, culture, art, educational and children's programmes, sport and entertainment
- To provide prompt and professional news coverage of events in Georgia, including regional news, and international news
- To be pluralistic and unbiased, reflect multicultural and multi-ethnic nature of Georgian society, and to refrain from opining
- To outsource at least one quarter of its output
- To support and promote Georgian national, spiritual and cultural values and diversity

The law specifies a grievance procedure available to GPB in cases of violations of its editorial independence by government or other interference. It includes referral to the country's broadcasting commission, GNCC, or a court application. It names the Board of Trustees as the main governing and regulatory body inside the organisation, and defines its roles and responsibilities. It also names the Director General as the other management body, leaving the rest of the structure to be determined internally by GPB.

The Broadcasting Law also establishes a broadcasting fee pegged to a taxpayer's status as a legal form of funding for the Public Broadcaster, but within the same article it makes a provision which hibernates the enforcement of the broadcasting fee until an unspecified later date. In its place, the provision makes an allocation of 0.12% of the previous year's state budget as a source of funding for GPB.

Among the articles applying to all broadcasters within the body of the law, there are paragraphs specifically referring to the public broadcaster, such as limitations in its commercial activities and in collecting advertising revenues. One of the latest amendments in this area is prohibition of all commercial advertising by the public broadcaster, with the exception of sports programmes. It appears to be an indirect measure aimed at ring-fencing the majority of advertising for the main commercial TV stations, and a limited consolation prize for GPB's burden of covering major and expensive sporting events.

Code of Conduct for Broadcasters (2009)

The Georgian National Communications Commission, GNCC, which among other things issues broadcast licenses, was required by law to pass a Code of Conduct for Broadcasters, setting in motion regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms, and establishing complaints and appeals procedures. The Code was drafted with the help of experts from the Council of Europe and passed in 2009. It applies to all broadcasters in Georgia, including GPB.

GPB Internal Codes of Conduct

The Georgian Public Broadcaster has adopted its own, additional in-house code of conduct for staff journalists, editors and producers setting professional standards and principles of journalism ethics (GPB 2008). It is a comprehensive document, far more detailed than the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters. It was prepared with the assistance of BBC consultants, and drawing heavily on BBC Producers' Guidelines.¹⁹ Its function is similar to that of the Associated Press Stylebook, and other internal manuals or reference handbooks issued by major media organisations.

On top of the legislative, self-regulatory principles and codes summarised above, the News and Current Affairs unit of the GPB 1st Channel, *Moambe*, has elaborated its own guidelines, defining in more detail production and editorial procedures within the department. *Moambe* staff is required to follow all the above documents at work.

Assessment of GPB

In 2011, a visiting EBU representative summed up his view of GPB by saying that it was a shame that the transformation of the organisation from state broadcaster to a public service one in Georgia had only taken place on paper and not in reality.²⁰ At the time of the needs assessment research in late 2011, GPB was in the course of making yet more changes in its organisational chart. It is worth noting that not a single Director-General has ever served a full term at GPB since its inception, and the Broadcasting Law has been amended several times to allow for renewals of the Board of Governors. The latest such amendment took place in 2014 without immediately resolving the deadlock over the selection and replacement of its members.

It is quite paradoxical that with so many changes and legal and administrative manipulations creating a sense of GPB being in a state of permanent flux, many of its employees said in interviews that nothing ever changed at GPB.

¹⁹ Currently referred to as BBC Editorial Guidelines.

²⁰ A statement by the EBU consultant, Boris Bergant, at a meeting with GPB management in September 2011 attended by the present author.

At the time of writing the current paper, the GPB website did not provide an organisational chart. The chart available in 2011 showed that almost all power was concentrated at the top and rationed in a minimalist fashion to anyone below. It provided information on positions within the organisation, but very little about who did what in relation to programmes or processes at GPB. It was a static and mechanical picture, giving no insight into processes at work, or the nature of relationships among constituent parts. Even more worryingly, the chart fully reflected the vertical nature of the system, with a few “power” nodes at the top, very little in the middle, and a rather unstructured, list-like enumeration of specific departments sitting next to one another. The end result was that top management ended up trying to micromanage almost all elements of the system.

The word “Editor” did not appear even once in the chart, while the ever-present term “Producer” was overused to the point of being meaningless in reflecting the role or job description of a person in question. For example, the job description for one senior staff member, the General Producer, was to commission programmes in consultation with a few other senior staff members, to oversee their production and execution, procurement or acquisition, and later to assess how they worked and sat in the schedule. In other words, the job required doing everything from the point of view of a programme-making broadcasting organisation. The classical division of a sustained programme-making process present in many serious broadcast outlets, namely into: 1) designing and commissioning programmes, 2); producing and editing actual programmes, and finally 3) editorially controlling their impact and effectiveness, was nowhere to be found at GPB.

The same could be said about the News department, whose head was responsible for newsgathering, editorial shape of news and current affairs bulletins and programmes, for some running orders, and even for the actual production or execution of the flagship 8 o’clock evening news bulletin. There was no clear evidence of a typical structured editorial process involving asking and discussing essential questions such as what the main stories of the day are, why they are important to the public, how best they can be covered, in what order to present them, or how to give wider context, or deeper insight to them.

Separateness

Another striking aspect of the organisational structure at GPB is the discrete nature of its constituent parts. This time, the division is quite institutionalised and has an unwelcome effect on the interaction between channels and departments. Most staff – particularly at senior level – consider their units completely separate and independent from one another, and often do not perceive themselves as part of the same entity, working to the same mission statement and strategy, or common goals.

GPB departments regard each other as rival consumers of the budget, and not as co-operative business units sharing it. Internal budgetary allocations within the organisation are based on a mechanical advance process, which is not based on

merit or elements of creative competition. There is no mechanism for renegotiating or amending budgetary allocations.

While the organisation perennially complains of the shortage of funds necessary to improve its output, it fails to acknowledge an obvious waste of resources caused by duplication of effort and infrastructure (see sections below). The source of such waste is a mechanical approach consisting in splitting the operations into totally separate entities treated by people at the top as their fiefdoms. Occasional efforts to compensate for that with fake synergies such as broadcasting TV audio signal on radio channels to save a little money on programming can only have an opposite effect on the audience: they switch to other channels.

The paradox of PIK

The now defunct First Informational Caucasian Channel, PIK, was redesigned and re-launched after its satellite signal had been switched off – arguably for political reasons following pressure from Moscow – by a Western provider not long after Georgia's short war with Russia in 2008. It started broadcasting again via a different satellite in 2010 on a much grander scale in a remarkably short time with a direct injection of several million US dollars from the reserve fund in the Georgian government budget. The channel broadcast mostly news and current affairs content in a 24 hours format in Russian, and was designed as a counterbalancing act to the impact of the Russian media in the region²¹.

Following the defeat of the Georgian army in August 2008, the region as a whole followed the Russian media with renewed attention and vigilance and quite possibly more respect. It was clearly a propaganda scoop for the Russians, who had used the media to send a powerful signal to the Caucasian nations and ethnic groups that their aspiration either for genuine independence or more autonomy would meet with resolute countermeasures from Moscow. Coupled with a plethora of Russian television channels available widely by satellite or cable across the Caucasus and packed with attractively formatted entertainment programmes, the Russian media had an unquestionable informational superiority on which to build and disseminate their version of the truth. President Saakashvili challenged that situation with PIK.

The official version for injecting several million US dollars into PIK operations at the time was that the GPB management had requested a separate allocation from the government to boost its external service channel. In retrospect, most observers agree that it was President Saakashvili's initiative after the growing discomfort that Georgia had largely failed to win the information war with Russia about the way the August 2008 conflict had been perceived in the West. The politics around the re-launch of PIK, and the large sums of money involved compared to the GPB budget, triggered considerable resentment within GPB. Most GPB staff did not see PIK as its integral part.

²¹ For a more detailed report on the re-launch of the channel, see Barry 2011.

The fact that PIK's start-up operation enjoyed ample funding, and was being managed by an ostensibly outside commercial company – but in reality by executive members of its own staff with a very wide mandate from the presidential apparatus – did not help win the hearts and minds of GPB employees, either. The differences between generous salary levels at PIK compared to those at the rest of GPB added insult to injury, creating a high level of animosity within what was – at least on paper – one and the same organisation.

Within a very short period of time, PIK management and senior staff created what looked like an efficient, forward-looking and positively aggressive broadcasting operation based on a modern, multimedia platform, with robust provision of news and current affairs programmes, and an interactive on-line news component. In stark contrast, it underscored the parochial nature and backwardness of the core public service broadcaster's operations. In fact, PIK was the first news-driven TV channel operation of its kind in Georgia, with a capacity to broadcast a 24-hour news stream, but throughout its short lifetime remained largely unknown to the general Georgian public.

There had never been a single attempt to integrate any of the operations of PIK, or its outputs by the rest of GPB. PIK's offices and studios were based in different buildings, rented from another commercial TV channel at relatively high cost, even though it would have been quite easy to house them in GPB's headquarters. There was virtually no managerial or editorial interaction between the two entities, let alone a common editorial, or newsgathering platform.

PIK and the 1st Channel's news and current affairs departments had totally separate newsgathering teams and operations, with separate foreign offices and separate sets of reporters and correspondents, even though some of them were unquestionably bilingual in Georgian and Russian. In an accountable system this obvious duplication of effort, staff and resources would have been next to impossible to justify before a truly autonomous Board of Trustees, and ultimately the Georgian taxpayer.

Instances of wasteful duplication abound in other areas of GPB as well, particularly in news and current affairs. The concept of output sharing and reversioning – a pretty universal tool in most multi-channel, and multimedia operations, does not exist. New programmatic formats and programme concepts brought in and developed at PIK had not been even discussed by core GPB management, and none of them had been adopted or transferred into GPB schedules. For example, both PIK and the 1st Channel had separate documentary film production units, and there was no evidence of any co-operation or sharing of outputs between them. PIK also developed quite a robust on-line presence and content provision, something almost entirely lacking in the GPB output to this day.

The fearful asymmetry

The 3rd Channel (PIK) was able to perform a complete turn-around within a short period of time – about a year – only to be closed a year or so later and leaving very little legacy behind. The rest of GPB has taken 10 years to meander through a maze

of superficial changes to where it is today. The obvious question would be: why was there such an asymmetry between the two entities? And why such stark contrast in their performance? It seems that the answer mostly lies in the political conditioning around the two entities.

- PIK was re-launched at a time of political expediency after the 2008 war enjoying massive government support as a propaganda tool against Russia;
- It benefited from a hefty injection of start-up funds, free from the budget-approval limitations imposed on the rest of GPB;
- Its budget accountability was liberated from standard GPB procedures and tied to programming priorities, based on a strategy and specific milestones;
- Generous salaries offered to production and editorial staff attracted more quality individuals, while in-house training closed the skills and competency gaps;
- The management and executive editorial staff enjoyed a high level of editorial autonomy and initially a fair degree of respect from the government. Consequently, they were able to develop their own editorial policy and standards.

Shortly after the parliamentary election in October 2012, and following a strike by PIK journalists who in protest at suspended salary payments had broadcast their programmes without the sound on, the channel was taken off air. Cable providers across Georgia stopped carrying the station's signal and for a brief period it continued to operate as an Internet-only television outlet. After several moves to change its ownership and legal status, the channel's license was revoked and it stopped broadcasting permanently. Its several hundred staff lost jobs overnight and dispersed across different media organisations and left for other countries with virtually none absorbed into other GPB operations – a clear indication how separate both entities had been all that time.

There are different theories and interpretations why PIK was taken off air and why the closure did not trigger protests within the Georgian civil society.²² In the course of its operation, there were strong indications – partly supported by whatever statistics were available from the North Caucasus – that as an alternative regional provider of news and information PIK was gaining sizeable audiences across the region and attracting increasing online traffic less than a year into its revamped existence. But many observers say that the interview with the then Russian president, Dimitry Medvedev, in August 2011, conducted jointly by PIK, Russia Today TV channel and Echo Moskvyy, painted President Saakashvili in an unfavourable light. There were unofficial reports that he had been infuriated by its impact and by what he had seen as ineptitude of PIK presenters to counterbalance

²² For an account of the re-launch of PIK and the politics behind its closure, see Transparency International's report 2013, pp. 8-10.

the carefully staged performance by Medvedev.²³ The event had apparently started the process of disengagement of the presidential administration from the channel amid growing but never officially articulated suspicions that PIK was being infiltrated by journalists sympathetic to Russia, or opposed to Saakashvili – or both. Paradoxically, the man in Georgia behind unsaddling Saakashvili, Bidzina Ivanishvili, was among those highly critical of PIK for what they saw as blanket anti-Russian coverage. The short-lived operation did not leave any legacy to draw on, and GPB management did not make any attempts at any point during its operation to exploit what the channel had to offer for the wider organisation. The remaining assets of the company managing PIK went over in a rather non-transparent transaction to a holding headed by a Lithuanian national which some observers believe to be a front for a Russian-inspired ploy to permanently erase any trace of the short-lived GPB third channel PIK.

The Future of GPB as a Broadcaster

Many interviewees for the needs assessment report, including GPB staff members, said in private conversations that much of the GPB output was “unwatchable”. Many of those made a point of singling out the news and current affairs department, *Moambe*, as better than the rest, but immediately proceeded to criticise the content of the news bulletins and talk shows. The rest of the output was deemed unworthy even of criticism.

Some interviewees complained that the potential ability of some news programming at GPB to attract a wider audience was killed off by scheduling poor quality output just before or after the news. The lack of proper, professionally designed and well resourced audience research and figures for particular programmes and programming strands, and reliance on anecdotal evidence or pure gossip has done GPB a lot of damage. But there is limited understanding within the organisation of the importance of knowing audience needs and expectations, and little ability of translating such knowledge into captivating content.

The 1st Channel’s News and Current Affairs (Moambe)

The output of the news and current affairs department at the 1st Channel is often showcased as an example how far GPB has traveled on the way to editorial independence, impartiality and balance. But it is examined in isolation from other output, while it is important to see how *Moambe* products impact on other programming and channels. However, there is no evidence of cross-fertilisation of outputs between departments or channels at GPB.

Current media market research indicates that GPB’s news and current affairs output enjoys a 6-7% audience share, while the rest of the programming stays at

²³ This was intimated by PIK editorial staff and presenters themselves in private conversations with the present author in Tbilisi in 2011.

about 2%. The *Moambe* department staff has repeatedly stated that they want to continue the editorial and journalism training and development initiated by the BBC in 2008-2010 in order to make the whole news output of the channel an industry standard.

A short period of monitoring the news output of *Moambe* conducted for the needs assessment manifested many editorial and technical deficiencies, political bias and lack of balance in the news bulletins.²⁴ There were strong indications that news items directly related to the activities of President Saakashvili had actually been produced outside GPB by dedicated crews affiliated to the former administration and inserted into the bulletins.²⁵

The 2nd Channel

In 2011, the 2nd channel at GPB broadcast mainly unedited and live parliamentary sessions, political briefings, pressers and party political broadcasts. The rest were repeats and vacant airtime. With a budget of about 400,000 lari (or less than 200,000 Euro) per year, and after fixed and operational costs, the channel had virtually nothing left to make its own programmes.

The channel has very limited, or negligible audience. But on the political level, and within GPB management, everybody argued that the channel was necessary and useful because its purpose was to defuse political tension and appease the opposition. The plans to re-launch and develop it as a *bona fide* parliamentary channel similar to BBC Parliament, or the American C-SPAN network have come to nothing.

GPB Radio

Only about 4% of GPB's resources go into radio operations and programming – about half of what many public service broadcasters with both TV and radio operations invest in the medium. Its Radio 1 on 102.4 FM is a generalist radio station. Its mixed format of music and speech-based programming is interspersed with hourly news bulletins. The station also produces talk shows, radio drama, children's programmes, and covers sporting events. The station has its own news and current affairs unit, which outputs 5 minute illustrated news bulletins on the hour from 0600 till 2200. The unit does not share output or co-operate with the TV news operations. The news bulletins are fashioned on popular commercial formats of reading text against music beds. There was no evidence that the Radio news department is involved in any active newsgathering.

Radio 2 on 100.9 FM plays almost exclusively music, and no news. It is hard to see any public service remit in the content of Radio 2. There are many music radio

²⁴ The monitoring of *Moambe* output was conducted by the present author in the week of 5-9 September 2011.

²⁵ See Transparency International's 2013 report p. 9 on co-ordinated news bulletins across TV channels under Saakashvili presidency.

stations in Georgia, but what distinguishes Radio 2 from other music stations is the choice of music.

Radio appears low on the GPB management's priority list, but compared to television it is a cheap and effective medium, requiring very modest investment to achieve pronounced and noticeable results and impact on audience figures. In contrast to GPB's television channels, its radio stations already stand out on Georgia's radio frequencies and can easily become market leaders once their schedule and programming are properly calibrated and improved.

Recommendations

The Georgian public broadcaster is firmly stuck in its current position as a marginal player on the broadcast media market and has accepted outside views about its role and limitations as its own. In order to break through, GPB needs to formulate a clear mission statement, which would be based on audience surveys and research, in order to institute a genuine editorial process and forward thinking.

It is clear that GPB's biggest potential asset is the News and Current Affairs component. Investment of extra resources into the development and further improvement of that department, and propagation of its projected achievements across all GPB channels is the most likely and feasible avenue to follow in an attempt to reconnect GPB with wider audiences and win their trust.

Moambe should be seen as a hub or a focal point for radical change in the quality of output and editorial integrity. The changes achieved at *Moambe* would strengthen the 1st Channel, enable to revive the future of the two radio channels and the ailing 2nd television channel. At the same time, it is necessary to eliminate wasteful duplication of effort at GPB. *Moambe* should become an autonomous unit within the GPB structure, and should be split away from the 1st Channel, become responsible for all newsgathering, and news output generation for all channels, including radio. The new unit would coordinate editorial planning and policies as well as all news products, which should be shared and re-versioned according to format needs and specificity of a given outlet by dedicated teams. It would work towards being seen in the future by the public as the main news provider in Georgia. The Georgian public needs to know that whenever they tune in to any GPB outlet, there will be quality news and information within their reach.

The simplest and most economical way of reviving the 2nd or "Parliamentary" channel would be to make it a news and politics channel, with the inclusion of specialist parliamentary coverage and reporting also supplied by *Moambe*. It could broadcast short hourly news bulletins on the hour throughout the day, but also carry the main news bulletins of the 1st Channel. It could also rebroadcast a number of 1st Channel products at different times, such as talk shows and documentaries and include programmes in ethnic minority languages.

The overhauled news division should also supply radio news bulletins on the hour using general news content generated by the unit. Radio 2, which currently only plays music, should broadcast news summaries of 1 or 2 minutes duration on the hour. It should also have an on-line news team, and should develop robust online content provision drawing on its broadcast output.

The recommendations included in the needs assessment report in 2011 emphasised the need for extensive, long-term journalism and editorial training concentrated on the news division seen as the central part of the organisation. An efficient, well managed news division would be in a position to populate schedules across television and radio channels and create a credible online presence for GPB at a relatively low cost through re-versioning and judicious rebroadcasting. It would supply skeletal programming content to all channels which their own teams would find easier to populate further with proprietary in-house programming.

Conclusion

The Georgian public service broadcaster has been unable to develop into an autonomous and independent media organisation in spite of all the legal and institutional safeguards. It has been a victim of intense political manipulation and interference throughout its existence, and most domestic and external interventions to improve its position concentrated on changes in legislation and on administrative measures, which the political class has always been able to bypass or bend to its needs.

The perennially marginal position of GPB on the Georgian media market also appears to be the result of deliberate political action orchestrated by the owners or controllers of commercial television channels who do not want to see GPB grow into a potential competitor.²⁶ This is a systemic limitation in the Georgian media landscape which has been thoroughly politicised and which legal regulations have not been able to overcome. The conclusion of the needs assessment conducted in 2011 was that the best chance for GPB to break through was to develop its internal strength. The main instrument for that is professionalisation of its staff and management and deep structural reforms – something that even the best media laws could not provide, and international organisations have been so far reluctant to fund. The present paper fully endorses that position in the context of the political changes in Georgia following the elections in 2012 and 2013.

²⁶ Speaking off the record, most interviewees for the Needs Assessment Report of 2011 said that the rationale for both the administration and the owners of main TV channels was more commercial than political – GPB's higher ratings would divert advertising away from the main market players.

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